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Caitlin Anessa Childers
cachilder@coastal.edu

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The Intersection of Art History and Graphic Design

By

Caitlin Childers

Art History and Graphic Design

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
In the HTC Honors College at
Coastal Carolina University

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Louis E. Keiner
Director of Honors

Jeff Case
Associate Professor

A study of Graphic Design provides an excellent opportunity to work in an interdisciplinary field, particularly when paired with a degree in Art History. Over the course of my time at Coastal I have had a challenging time trying to unite the two parts of my degree, as well as finding a project that best suits my style of design. Both parts have inspired the other, but only now has the project been entirely focused on uniting the two. In considering my capstone I decided to create an art museum exhibition for a graphic designer.

One of the most difficult things to discover as a beginning designer is what their unique style is, and how they intend to use it. Personally, I have consistently had an illustrative style throughout my college career. In critiques this style has, on occasion, been compared to childish art. The mental reconciliation of this illustrative style within a professional world has been difficult to achieve, however studying far more talented and well-established designers with a similarly illustrative style has helped me close the gap between the two. When researching influential designers with this style my focus specifically landed on Shepard Fairey.

Fairey, like myself, is a South Carolina native, with an illustrative design and graffiti style that focuses on political activism and the questioning of authority in America¹. His work is strongly influenced by the iconography of American media and celebrity, as well as differences

¹ Fairey, S. (2015, December 03). Manifesto. Retrieved May 02, 2021, from <https://obeygiant.com/propaganda/manifesto/>

in reception that his work receives when changing the expected imagery of this media.² At the age of 39 Fairey established himself as well known in art historical circles by creating one of the most influential campaign posters of the 20th century.³ The Obama “Hope” poster is one that will appear alongside the biography of the 44th president for decades to come.⁴ While this is Fairey’s most recognizable work to those outside of the art world he has plenty of other claims to fame within his portfolio.

Apart from the Obama “Hope” poster one of Fairey’s more famous works is his image of Andre the Giant. This piece from the beginning of his career is what truly launched him to fame.⁵ The “OBEY Giant” image began appearing on every building, street corner, and light that could possibly be graffitied.⁶ Throughout the remainder of his career Fairey has been unable to shake his relation to this image, and instead has embraced it as a brand.⁷ This image’s relevance and use as a brand very clearly became the inspiration for the name of the exhibition. Even those who aren’t familiar with Fairey himself know the “OBEY Giant” logo.⁸

² Fairey, S. (2015, December 03). Manifesto. Retrieved May 02, 2021, from <https://obeygiant.com/propaganda/manifesto/>

³ Visconti, Luca M., John F. Sherry Jr., Stefania Borghini, Laurel Anderson, and John Deighton Served as Editor and Soren Askegaard Served as Associate Editor for This Article. "Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the “Public” in Public Place." *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 3 (2010): 511-29. pg518

⁴ Visconti, Luca M., John F. Sherry Jr., Stefania Borghini, Laurel Anderson, and John Deighton Served as Editor and Soren Askegaard Served as Associate Editor for This Article. "Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the “Public” in Public Place." *Journal of Consumer Research* 37 pg518

⁵ Riggle, Nicholas Alden. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 243-57. pg256

⁶ Riggle, Nicholas Alden. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 243-57. pg256

⁷ RIGGLE, NICHOLAS ALDEN. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 243-57. pg256

⁸ RIGGLE, NICHOLAS ALDEN. "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 243-57. pg256

While focusing on Fairey as an influence for how my design style works within the professional world, he also helped unite my two majors when creating the final work for my capstone. Using Fairey's work as a key point of focus I created the advertising, directional imagery, and overall brand identity for a museum exhibition of his work. In doing so I was able to work within a museum space to design an exhibition, research the work of a contemporary artists as opposed to the more famous artists of history, and consider and design for an exhibition as a three-dimensional space as opposed to focusing on advertising. Any design assignments created prior to the capstone were pieces that worked individually. These assignments included advertising, signage, and generally informative documentation. Studying and designing an exhibition based on Shepard Fairey's work united each of these elements of design for a final piece.

This exhibition itself was broken into three separate categories, each representing a different decade of Fairey's work. These different decades included his graffiti, prints, and design from 1990 to 2020. For the interior of the exhibition the goal was to create both floor signs that directed the viewers, and information blocks, that coordinated with the work while still maintaining an original theme. Each decade was given a color theme that was prevalent in Fairey's work at the time. From 1990-2000 the prominent colors were black and red, 2000-2010 were blue and a warm yellow, and 2010-2020 was a dark turquoise and red. These theming colors provided the opportunity for viewers to visually identify which group of work they were walking into without being required to read the signs every time.

In researching Fairey's work it quickly became apparent that the design elements used in his work throughout the entirety of his career were ripped paper and floral patterns. Their prevalence in Fairey's work made them a key element in the design of the exhibition. Upon

making this realization I began to pair the two in ways that were visually interesting but did not distract the viewers from the information itself. The first part of the exhibition that needed to be created using these elements was the introductory wall of the exhibit which explains who the artist is and why he is important. Because this image was the first part of the exhibition that visitors would see it needed to set the tone for the remainder of the design elements included.

These introductory walls often include an image of the artist, and it was apparent this particular wall had to include Shepard in his own style⁹ For the design of the introductory wall I began with the shape of ripped paper. This shape mimicked the graffiti inspiration found in Fairey's work without being a direct copy of the shapes shown. The ripped paper was used to separate the imagery of Fairey from the actual information included on the wall. The image of Fairey was placed in the upper left triangle of the wall with one of his floral patterns in the background. Incorporated next was a vertical image that included his "OBEY Giant" logo underneath his portrait to fill the space. To the right of this vertical image was vertical text that included the name and years of the show in red to match the colors shown in the imagery. The red also served the purpose of making the text noticeable but not overpowering, as it is important but not the main focus. Fairey's name was meant to be the most prominent part of the introductory wall, this was achieved by making the length of the name roughly half the space of the wall. The name was given a dark blue that matches the imagery so that the text was prominent, but not brightly colored and overbearing. Both the artist's name and the exhibition name were done in a combination of bold and regular font to create visual interest. Below the

⁹ Figure 1

name was the information about the artist in a simple font meant to be easily read by viewers, rather than ornamental.

After the introductory wall was created it became apparent that the outside of the building should include similar imagery for advertising.¹⁰ The best way to create this was by using the introductory wall as a base and building from it. This was created by resizing the imagery of the introductory wall and removing the informational text. The main part of the advertising was taken up by the image of Fairey himself in an effort to catch the eye of passerby. The image now takes up the left third of the space. Fairey's "OBEY Giant" logo image has also been expanded and takes up the top third of the space. Below the "OBEY Giant" image is the textual information for the show in the same colors and fonts as the main text on the introductory wall. This information includes the exhibition name, artist's name, and the dates of the exhibition's availability.

The next part of the exhibition design was the directional imagery that would be included on the floor.¹¹ This element, like the elements before it, needed to include the floral imagery, font, and ripped paper shown throughout Fairey's portfolio. In researching the floral pattern needed for these directionals I discovered that Fairey himself had created a pattern with his famous OBEY logo hidden in the petals. This pattern became the background of the directionals that was then covered with a ripped piece of paper in a solid color. The solid background provided the opportunity to put in text describing each group of works alongside an arrow guiding visitors in the right direction. This text was done in the same bolded font as Fairey's name on the introductory wall.

¹⁰ Figure 2

¹¹ Figure 3

Once the directionals were created it was time to move on to the information blocks that appear beside the artist's work.¹² The information blocks took inspiration from the design of the floor directionals. All informational text for the work was aligned to the left side of the block, the text itself was placed on a white square that was slightly off center, also to the left side of the space. Behind this block was a solid color space, the color was dependent upon the decade the work was from. Aligned to the right side of the top layer of the information block was a thin strip of the floral pattern. This was applied as a ripped strip of paper in an attempt to match the graffiti theme shown elsewhere.

Creating each of these coordinating elements for the exhibition has provided me with the opportunity to both look deeply at Fairey's work as an art historian and round out my portfolio as a designer. Museum education, the career I'm aiming for, is one that is demanding of multiple skills primarily because of the lack of funding. Graphic design has given me an edge when compared to other art historians, as I can two jobs for roughly the same pay of one employee. The Shepard Fairey project can show possible future employers that I am capable of researching, designing, and advertising for any museum exhibition that comes their way. More importantly, it shows that an illustrative style of design is applicable to the professional world.

¹² Figure 4

Imagery

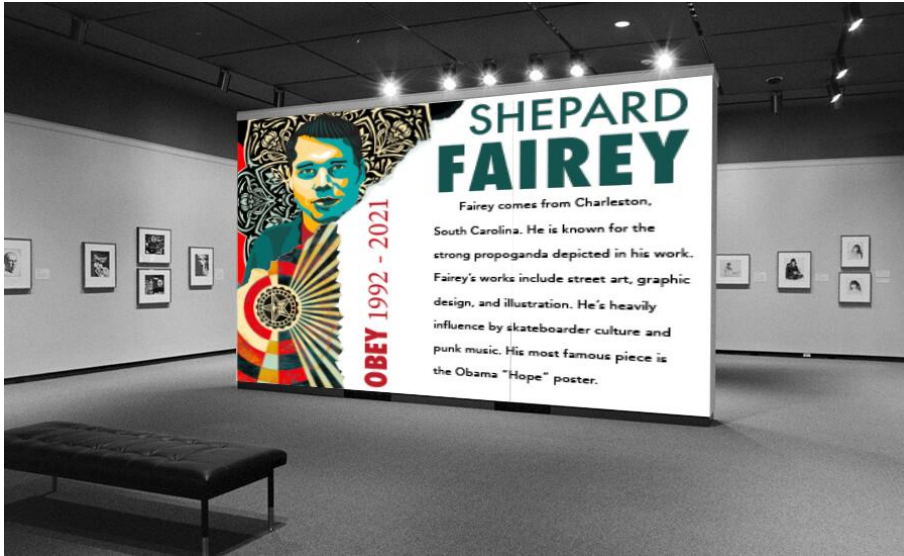


Fig 1. Shepard Fairey Introductory Wall



Fig 2. Shepard Fairey Exhibition Ad



Fig 3. Shepard Fairey Exhibition Directionals

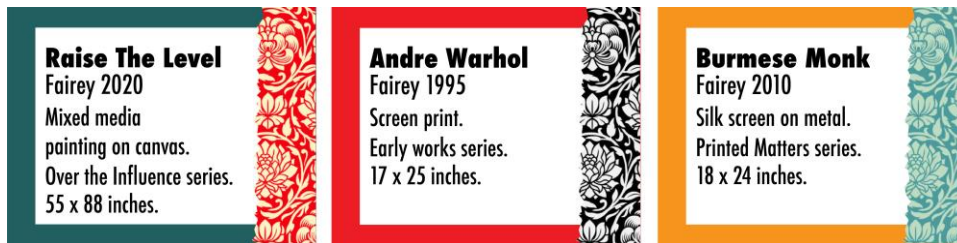


Fig 4. Shepard Fairey Exhibition Information Blocks

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